

**Commandant's Remarks at the December Graduation Ceremony
19 December 2003**

Ladies and Gentlemen -- good afternoon and welcome to this graduation and commissioning ceremony. This is a proud occasion for these 15 outstanding young men and women – who close out the ranks of the Class of 2003 -- "Protectors of the Free."

Graduations remain one of the most memorable moments in one's life. It's the final punctuation—an exclamation point—on a sentence that took years to write. Graduation day is a whirlwind with high energy and peaked emotion. Perhaps that is why we forget, though only momentarily, that there are many more sentences left to write.

Men and women in the Class of 2003, you are no doubt still on your emotional high, but get ready, because there are many more lines to pen in the stories of your careers as commissioned leaders of character.

You have been given a great opportunity by the American people, an opportunity that few citizens will ever experience - seize the day!

I know that all of our graduates are anxious to join in a well-deserved break before they begin their careers in uniform – so I will be brief.

But, I do have some thoughts that I want to share with this group.

First and foremost, we are proud of you. Each of you has completed a unique journey that has brought you to this point in time – a journey marked by a number of challenges which each of you has negotiated with great courage and determination. You finished this journey! So, on behalf of the Superintendent, the Dean and I, we offer our heartfelt congratulations.

As you take your rightful place in the *Long Gray Line*, let me ask you to do a few things. First, dedicate yourselves to excellence in your service to the nation. Take time to thank those who have supported you here - - your parents, families, friends, mentors, coaches, instructors, and your fellow citizens. Many of these are here today. Please join me in a round of applause for their commitment to you and to your service to country.

Next, I want you to consider for a moment the significance of the commissioning oath you are about to take. You will soon be joining the ranks of our Army's commissioned officers. The oath you take – the commission you receive – is a covenant. Officership is a sacred vocation. As General Douglas MacArthur so eloquently described it, "Yours is the profession of arms – You are the leaven that binds together the entire fabric of our national system of defense."

Over the past years you have prepared yourselves to become commissioned officers -- prepared to fight and win our wars or to perform whatever task the nation asks. No one can fulfill the responsibilities of officership without a unique combination of intellectual, military, physical, and moral-ethical skills – you have those skills, because you have just completed the world's finest preparation for officership.

You are ready! The Army needs you and is anxiously awaiting your arrival in its formations!

But the “oath” means more than just “being ready and being qualified.” When you accept your commission, you will accept a moral obligation to defend our society. Democracies expect their citizens to serve in uniform, and the American democracy will expect you – the commissioned officer – to exercise exceptional leadership and care with America's treasure – its sons and daughters.

General Gordon R. Sullivan, 32nd Army Chief of Staff said it so well in his acceptance speech of West Point’s Thayer Award earlier this fall. His charge to you was to remember that “When you are tested as an officer in some far-away place in the middle of the night, with only what is inside your brain and soul, and with 20 or 30 American Soldiers looking to you for guidance, protection and yes, even love, you will be up to the test because you, like almost 40,000 other members of the Long Gray Line, learned well the lessons of Sylvanus Thayer and countless others who have made West Point what it is today.

So, what advice do I offer? First and foremost, remember the basic truth about leadership: it’s all about building “trust” -- trust between leaders and subordinates. Soldiers don't care what you know until they know that you care. Show them you do!

And... keep giving to this country, that has given so much to us. Remember our mission: to devote yourselves to a "lifetime of selfless service to nation."

And lastly, enjoy your career in uniform – it's a wonderful and noble profession!

Again, congratulations to you all, and to your proud families. Today marks the end of your cadet careers; but far more significantly, it marks the beginning of your service as commissioned officers in the world's best Army.

I'm honored to spend these few minutes with you, and I salute the newest members of the *Long Gray Line*!

Best wishes, Go Army, God speed, and God Bless the USA!